How you can spot ……

…a con artist

Investing in securities is risky enough without worrying about whether your salesperson is out to fleece you. To be an informed investor, you must know what danger signs to look for. Some are subtle, and some are easier to spot.

Rule one: Con artists do not like to be found.

Con artists know that being themselves hurts business. Effective con artists must disguise their true motives. Whether your first contact with the con artist is an unsolicited telephone call or a stranger ringing your doorbell, the con artist takes great pains to look, sound and speak like you or me. Con artists like to blend in with others in your group, whether that group is political, community (such as the local senior center), religious, or other. Con artists quickly get to know people in the group so they can use the group to spread the word about their questionable investments and reel in unsuspecting investors.

Rule two: Con artists dress for success.

Although con artists would like you to believe that they are "just plain folk," they are smart enough to realize that this alone will not sway you to part with your money. They work to be smooth and to appear professional and successful. Con artists may dress as though they are wealthy and they operate from impressive-looking offices – or at least give you the impression that they do. If con artists contact you by mail, the address of their so-called office may be prestigious-sounding, but it is often nothing more than a mail drop. Your best bet is to look beneath the surface. Do some serious investigating before you part with your money.

Rule three: Con artists often push poorly understood financial products.

Today, a variety of institutions, from banks to brokerage firms to financial planners offers a wide range of financial products. With such a confusing mix to choose from, it is no wonder that many people turn to financial advisers for guidance. Con artists know this and they are ready to assume full responsibility for your investment decisions. Do not let them! When it comes to your money, think things through for yourself after getting all the facts. Never give someone control of your purse strings just because you think you are too old, too young, or too financially inexperienced. If you really need help, deal only with financial advisers, broker-dealers, or financial institutions with proven records of accomplishment.

Con artists also appeal to the dreamer in you. Many people secretly believe that Horatio Alger's rags-to-riches story can become a reality for them -–if only they get the right break. To them, investing in untested technologies and cutting-edge products before anyone else does is a sure-fire way to make money. International instruments such as letters of credit supposedly issued by foreign banks may spell stability for some people. Con artists sabotage your dreams. They promise you the investment chance of a lifetime without giving you any meaningful written information on the product or the pitfalls involved.

Rule four: Con artists bring out the worst in you.

Skilled con artists can bring out your worst traits, particularly greed, fear, and insecurity. Fear comes into play when the con artist warns you that complaining about a failed investment to the government may result in your spoiling it for others or "rocking the boat." Con artists try to make you feel inadequate if you do not believe them. In addition, con artists know how to make you believe that if you lack confidence in them, this is a personal slight to their abilities. If you find yourself making investment-related decisions based only on your emotions, watch out!

Rule five: Con artists are fair weather friends.

Before you invest, con artists are very friendly. They take a personal interest in you unexpectedly. They call back when they promised they would. Each time, they tell you even more good things about the investment. You may feel you are being pressured into investing. You are. Face it. Despite his or her kind words, the con artist will do anything in his or her power to make a sale. In fact, the contacts may become so repeated that you may wish that your first contact had been your last. Too often, however, once you have invested your money, contact with the con artist dwindles and then stops altogether. If you cannot get answers to your questions following your investment, this may signal danger.

Rule six: For every silver lining, there is a cloud.

Every investment involves risk. However, to hear the con artist explain it, the investment is too good to be true. Trust your inner voice if you hear claims like these:

"I just got a *hot tip* from an *inside source* that this stock will go through the roof."

"The *rumor* on the street is that the deal is ready to take off."

"Your return is *guaranteed*. There is no way you can lose money."

"Gotta get in on the ground floor *now*, or you'll be left out in the cold. In fact, we'll send a messenger over tomorrow to pick up your check." (Con artists often use this device to avoid federal mail fraud charges.)

"Where else can you earn such a *large return*? Not in CDs or in a savings account."

"In just a *short while*, your profits will come rolling in."

"If this does not perform as I just said, *we will refund your money, no questions asked."*

"*Everyone else* that invested in this did very well."

Remember that investment opportunities that seem too good to be true probably are. Be especially careful if the salesperson downplays any downside or denies that risk exists. Con artists are not very good at answering important questions. Watch out if the salesperson becomes reluctant to provide information on the following:

The background, educational history, and work experience of the deal's promoters, principals, or general partners

Information whether your investment monies will be segregated from other funds available to the business

Written information on the business' financial condition, such as a balance sheet and bank references

The track record of the business and its principals

The salesperson's name, where he or she is calling from, who he or she works for, his or her background, and what commission or other compensation he or she will receive

The salesperson's connection with the venture and any affiliates

In addition, be wary if the salesperson does not ask *you* questions about your past investment experience and your ability to withstand risk. Even if the salesperson does ask a few related questions, take heed if you get the sense that he or she is merely going through the motions.

Rule seven: Watch out for the man from P.O.N.Z.I (Pay out now, zero imminent).

Self-respecting con artists will not admit that they are involved in a Ponzi scheme. The Ponzi scheme was named after Charles Ponzi, an Italian immigrant who, after being jailed in Canada for fraud, came to Boston in about 1919. Ponzi solicited people to invest in International Postal Reply Coupons that could be redeemed for stamps. He promised them a 40 percent return in just 90 days. Authorities discovered that there were not enough coupons in circulation to support Ponzi's schemes. He was imprisoned in Massachusetts and then deported to Italy. The scheme he created, however, continues to survive in many forms.

In a typical Ponzi scheme, large returns are paid to initial investors out of the funds of later investors. This gives the first investors confidence and motivates others to invest. Unfortunately, the later investors lose all or most of their money. If you are promised high, guaranteed profits, and given no documentation about the investment, the promoters, or the risk, be careful. Ponzi operators also tend to persuade you to "roll over" your "profits" into yet another investment, so your return ends up on paper only.

Rule eight: Steer clear of pyramid schemes.

Pyramid schemes are a variation of the Ponzi scam. Think of a pyramid. Money is collected from people at the bottom to pay off other individuals farther up the pyramid. As more people invest, new pyramid levels are created, and your position in the pyramid rises. In theory, you would be entitled to more money. Many times, you must also buy a product to join.
However, unlike a true multi-level marketing plan, selling the product is less important than recruiting others to join the network. Ultimately, there comes a time when no new money flows in, when this happens, the pyramid collapses.

Tips to help you avoid falling prey to a con artist.

Avoiding being hurt by a con artist is as easy as doing your homework *before* you invest.

Contact your state securities regulator to see if the investment vehicle and the person selling it are registered.

Your state securities regulator will also be able to tell you if the salesperson has a disciplinary history, that is – whether any civil, criminal, or administrative proceedings have been brought against him or her.

Contact your local Better Business Bureau to see if any complaints have been filed against the venture's promoters or principals.

Deal only with financial advisers, broker-dealers, or financial institutions having a proven record of accomplishment.

Ask for written information on the investment product or business. Such information, including financial data on the company and the risks involved in the investment, is contained in a prospectus. Read it carefully.

Do not take everything you hear or read at face value. Ask questions if you do not understand, and do some sleuthing for yourself. If you need help evaluating the investment, go to a trustworthy independent, such as an attorney or an accountant.

Avoid investments touted as having no downside or risk.

The Securities Education Program provides publications covering a variety of investment-related topics.

In addition to publications, speakers are available to community groups and organizations at no charge. Groups interested in scheduling a Securities Education Program representative can call:

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